Ten Service Plans for Contemporary Worship

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Introduction

Some terms become hopelessly confusing as soon as they gain wide use. Contemporary worship is one of them. For most folks, the term has become shorthand for worship that is informed and shaped by contemporary cultural sensibilities, primarily musical. Other such sensibilities include the predominance of expressive praise; a few singers rather than a choir; a presentational leadership style; a desire for Spirit-led spontaneity; an evangelistic motivation; and an emphasis on the visual rather than the verbal, on intuition and feeling rather than words and linear thought. But in its strictest sense, contemporary worship means worship—in whatever style—that is offered now as opposed to way back when. So to call the service plans in this book contemporary is somewhat misleading. Yes, they presume amplified instruments and familiarity with music composed in the past generation or so. But they are historical and somewhat uncontemporary in the sense that they are based on worship services offered to God at least two years ago at the LOFT, the student-led Sunday evening service at Calvin College.

Some of what we do at Calvin College—and some of what is presented here—is indeed up-to-the-minute. On the other hand, students, like anyone else, need stability and connection. And as our Orthodox brothers and sisters teach us, the worship of the church does not, in the end, belong to us. It began long before us and will continue after we are gone. Good contemporary worship, it seems to me, follows the wisdom of ancient patterns, yet gives these patterns a fresh voice. It adapts older material, gratefully accepting and gently transforming tradition. And it welcomes new material from a variety of sources, placing things fittingly into the basic flow of worship. In the services presented here, that “flow” is largely determined by music. We move through the liturgy’s contours by singing one song after another. Then we give shape and direction to our singing with transitions, spoken prayers, readings from Scripture, and so on.

HOW TO USE THIS COLLECTION

The services in this book are presented in the form of structured notes (see below). Each service has a particular theme and a specific Bible text at its heart, and each generally follows a classic threefold pattern for worship: Gathering as God’s People, Hearing the Word, and Responding to the Word. That basic structure is further broken down into worship activities—usually labeled with “tion” words: celebration, lamentation, dedication, and so on. This reminds us that worship isn’t just twenty minutes before the “talk”; it isn’t a magical, metaphorical, musical journey into God’s lap. Rather it is an active, dramatic exercise, a dynamic dialogue between God and God’s people. On those occasions when we make use of a different pattern, the form still centers on the proclamation of the Word. Within these supportive structures, we strive to plan and enact services that exhibit qualities I have come to believe are essential to good worship (see p. 9).

Liturgical Notes

These indicate supplemental Scripture passages, prayers, and notes on spoken transitions. Sometimes a word-for-word transition or prayer is suggested; in other cases, I only shoot arrows in a direction I hope is helpful, and leave individual worship leaders to chase them down.
While you’re chasing, remember three things:

(1) Good transitions use words that point backward to what’s just happened (key words from the Scripture just read) and forward to what’s about to happen (lyrics from the next song).

(2) Good transitions avoid inserting the self (as in “I’d like you to stand up to sing . . .” or “Lord, I want to pray for . . .”).

(3) The best transitions always invite or encourage (rather than instruct) the congregation to enter into the next act of worship—confession, adoration, dedication, and so on.

Finally, because each service is centered in the proclaimed Word, sermon notes are included where at all possible.

**Musical Notes**

These offer practical suggestions for arranging songs and making transitions between songs so the service flows. They are by no means the last and best word on how to do a particular song. They are merely one way to perform a song in order to support its purpose in a particular liturgical context.

These notes presume a basic “band”: singer(s), a keyboard, a bit of hand percussion, and at least one guitar (in tune, please). At the college we are blessed with an embarrassment of gifted musicians, so our band is rather large: a piano and an electronic keyboard, three guitars (acoustic, electric, and bass), a drum kit (sometimes called a trap set), some hand percussion, a small singing ensemble (two to six people), and perhaps a solo instrument or two (saxophone, flute, violin). Even so, these notes should be helpful whether your worship leadership team has three or thirty-three members.

Read these service notes with a guitar or piano nearby. Play and speak through the transitions, noting what is going on inside you intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Feel free to jot comments and suggestions for yourself on the pages.

**Finally . . .**

An important point: despite the use of the imperative mood (for stylistic reasons), these service plans are not prescriptive. They are merely a jumping-off point for your own reflection and Spirit-led creative preparation. Don’t follow every suggestion in detail. Preachers will hear something different in a given text that is God’s Word for their time and place. Musicians and liturgists too should amend and adjust for their particular congregation. Add a litany, replace one song with one your congregation knows better, and so on. Do so with sensitivity and attention most of all to the purpose of a given liturgical element.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my predecessors at the LOFT—Gregg DeMey and Gregory Kett, and my assistants these past years: Peter Armstrong, Nathan Cole, Molly Delcamp, Jillayne Kelder, and especially Aaron Genzink. Besides these, there are too many other students to name who helped to plan and lead these services. Their creativity and commitment has made LOFT a marvelous learning experience—for them and for me—and a blessing for the entire college community. And, we hope, to God.
Good Contemporary Worship Is . . .

• **Covenantal.** Services are a *conversation* between God and God’s people in which we renew the covenant of grace.

• **Participative.** Worship leaders are not performers but *enablers* encouraging the full, conscious, active participation of the congregation (not “audience”).

• **Holistic.** We bring all of ourselves to worship: old and young, body and soul, brain and heart, doubt and belief, lament and joy.

• **Expansive.** We make creative use of words, music—and more!—from many times, places, peoples, and cultures to enlarge our vision of God’s kingdom and situate ourselves properly within it.

• **Reverent.** Even when playful, our worship acknowledges that we deal with a mysterious God when we gather together.

• **Spirit-directed.** We are led by the Holy Spirit in form and in freedom, both in prayer-filled planning and in the surprising moments of worship.

• **Expectant.** The Spirit blows where it will, so we worship with our sails raised, expecting great things of God and enjoying, rather than engineering, a contagious spiritual energy.

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**Music Sources**

One of the fundamental principles that sustains our worship at the LOFT is that a balanced musical diet is crucial for spiritual health. Finding the resources for such balance doesn’t require an entire shelf of hymnals and songbooks. A few select purchases, within the reach of even the most modest church budget, is all it takes. The songs chosen in this collection have been edited so that the vast majority of songs come from three primary sources:

• **Psalter Hymnal.** © 1987 CRC Publications, 2850 Kalamazoo SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560.

• **Sing! A New Creation** Leader’s edition. © 2002, jointly published by Faith Alive Christian Resources, a ministry of CRC Publications; the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; and the Reformed Church in America.

• Praise & Worship trilogy (which all come in a handful of editions, including the Piano/Guitar/Vocal edition [the one I use], the Worship Planner edition, the Keyboard Edition, the Instrumental edition, and more):
  - *Songs for Praise & Worship.* © 1992 Word Music
  - *More Songs for Praise & Worship.* © 2000 Word Music

In addition to these, the following are the other musical resources referenced in this volume.


• **Gather Comprehensive Accompaniment edition.** © 1994, GIA Publications, 7404 South Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638.


• **Libro de Liturgia y Cántico.** © 1998, Augsburg Fortress. The Spanish-language hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
Finally, a few children’s songs we have no music to, we simply know them.

- “I’ve Got the Joy”
- “Jesus Loves the Little Children”
- “Arky/Rise and Shine”

The song “I Cannot Come” is actually “The Wedding Banquet.” It can be found in the album Joy Is Like the Rain, © 1966, Medical Mission Sisters, 77 Sherman Street, Hartford, CT 06105-2260. mms@hartsem.edu.
Abbreviations

City on a Hill, Songs of Worship and Praise (CH)
Gather Comprehensive (GC)
Hillsong Music Collection (HMC)
Libro de Liturgia y Cántico (LLC)
Maranatha! Music Praise Chorus Book Third edition (MMP3)
Maranatha! Music Praise Chorus Book Fourth edition (MMP4)
Mil Voces para celebrar (MV)
More Songs for Praise & Worship (MSPW)
More Songs for Praise & Worship 2 (MSPW2)
Psalter Hymnal (PsH)
Shout to the Lord! Kids 2 (SLK2)
Sing! A New Creation (SNC)
Songs Young Life (SYL)
Songs for LiFE (SFL)
Songs for Praise & Worship (SPW)
Songs of the Vineyard vol. 2, 3, 4 (SV2, SV3, SV4)
This Far by Faith (TFF)
Worship & Praise Songbook (WPS)
Worship Today: Songs & Hymns for the Whole Church (WT)
Singing the Church Year
Matthew 28:1-6

Unlike other LOFT services, which take place on Sunday night and go for seventy-five minutes or more, this hymn sing service took place on a Friday and lasted under twenty-five minutes. It was part of a week-long project of educating students about the seasons of the church and what it means to find our identity, as Paul says, *in Christ*, inserting our stories into his story, giving our own lives context and purpose.

**CONGREGATION**

Musical Notes: The music begins immediately, even a few minutes before “official” start time.

**ADORATION**

Musical Notes: “O Come, Let Us Adore Him” (SPW 248). Key of F (one step lower than written music). To encourage the congregation to enter more deeply into adoration as they sing, introduce with just the piano. Other instruments are added each stanza (four in all): violin, bass, guitars playing arpeggios, and cymbal swells from the drummer. Build in intensity and volume until end. Repeat first stanza, this time a cappella.

Liturgical Notes: After song concludes, leader says something like the following: “The Lord be with you. *(And also with you.)* Welcome to ____. Today we are going to conclude our week-long series on the seasons and feasts of the church by journeying through the church year in song.”

**LAMENTATION**

Liturgical Notes: Leader continues, “Our journey begins in Advent where we find the Israelites—and ourselves—in ‘lonely exile’ awaiting Christ’s coming. But we sing with hope too (rejoice!), because of God’s sure promises. Please join us.”

Musical Notes: “O Come, O Come, Immanuel” (PsH 328, st. 1, 6). Play in Fm (half step up from written music) to make transition easier. Get at the song’s loneliness with a spare accompaniment on the stanzas (solo cello, guitar, and flute), and at the song’s hope with a two-handed keyboard joining on refrain. Let the first “rejoice!” sing out, and the next be a softer echo.

As the song concludes, piano transitions back into F major. Gentle introduction of the refrain of “Go, Tell It on the Mountain.”
**CELEBRATION**

_Liturgical Notes:_ While piano introduces “Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” leader says, “Our Advent hope is rewarded at Christmas, when we hear of the birth of our Savior. We burst with joy, and our joy spills over into Epiphany and into the whole world as we encourage one another to tell everyone the good news that Jesus Christ is born.”

_Musical Notes:_ “Go Tell It on the Mountain” (PsH 356). Key of F. Vocalists should cue congregational participation beginning not with the refrain, but with stanza 1: “While shepherds . . .” Play quietly, slowly, _rubato_—with anticipation. Use just the piano, one chord per bar, making use of the higher registers. Hold the last chord of the stanza as long as possible, then snap off. _A tempo_ (briskly), walk the bass up to F, and let the whole band join in celebrating, swinging. A saxophone or other brass can take it up another notch.

**CONFESSION**

_Liturgical Notes:_ After singing, leader prays along these lines: “Christ Jesus, we give you thanks for coming to dwell among us, to teach us how to live and how to love. We confess that as we try to follow your example, we often mess up. You urge us to holiness, but our hearts are fouled with our own sin (add specific confessions). Forgive us, Lord. (Do not end prayer with “Amen” or “in Jesus’ name” but let the prayer continue with the song.)

_Musical Notes:_ Near end of prayer, begin introduction to “Create in Me” (SNC 49). Key of G. Keep the accompaniment spare and prayerful. Introduce with the last line played by a plaintive violin and guitar. Piano and bass join when congregation begins singing. Sing twice through.

**REDEMPTION**

_Liturgical Notes:_ Leader says something like this: “During Lent, we remember our sinfulness, we ask for forgiveness, and as we follow Jesus into the last week of his life, we contemplate with awe the mystery of his sacrifice for our sakes.”

_Musical Notes:_ “What Wondrous Love Is This” (PsH 379, st. 1-2). Key of Dm. Single instrument introduction. To worship as thoughtfully as possible, sing a cappella.

**PROCLAMATION**

_Liturgical Notes:_ When music concludes, observe a moment of silence. Then, without further explanation, leader reads—or better yet, tells from memory—Matthew 28:1-6, the story of the resurrection.
**CELEBRATION**

**Musical Notes:** Drums, piano, and violin begin the celebratory “Celtic Alleluia” (SNC 148) immediately as Scripture reading ends. Key of G (one step below written music). For a very Celtic feel, a low tom drum (mimicking a bhodran) begins with a quarter-eighth pattern. The violin plays a *sfz*-attacked two-string drone on G and D (two beats/measure, no chord changes). The piano simply plays G in octaves down low. A tin whistle or soprano recorder plays the melody all the way through the refrain once. Then the congregation joins in. Hard snare rim shots on the three beats of the half-measure before the stanza begins give the congregation a clear cue where to begin. Piano joins providing melody and harmonic support on the stanzas, the drone harmony returns on the refrain. The penny whistle can go to the descant on the refrain when the congregation is confident in their singing.

The song concludes with two measures of the percussive drum and violin drone, a slight ritard, the last notes ringing out.

**INTERCESSION**

**Liturgical Notes:** Leader says something like this: “Our risen Lord ascends to heaven, but does not leave us alone—on the feast of Pentecost he sends us the Holy Spirit to comfort, to inspire, to unite, to renew us and the whole earth.

“Sing and learn with us this new song, a fresh breath of the Spirit. The stanzas will be sung for you, but please join on the refrain. Don’t worry if we have trouble, and our music sounds like little more than people mumbling in many languages—that might be fitting. Please join us.”

**Musical Notes:** Sing “Send Us Your Spirit” (SNC 163). Key of D. Sing gently, steadily, prayerfully. Soloists may sing the stanzas from various locations within the congregation. First stanza accompanied by piano, second by guitar, third by both. When the congregation sings the refrain after the stanzas 2 and 3, have a solo instrument play the melody a measure behind, in canon.

**DEDICATION**

**Liturgical Notes:** Leader prays as follows: “Holy Spirit, renewed daily by your love, may we follow Jesus through the rest of this day, this month, this whole year. Fill our days, our average, ordinary days with love for you, with humility and purpose for ourselves, and with compassion for our world. When we fall down, pick us up. Encourage us with your grace. May we do all that you have called us to, filled only with Jesus Christ, our All in All.”
ADORATION

Musical Notes: “You Are My All in All” (SPW 220). Key of G. To fill the room with adoration, accompany with full band and sing with gusto one time through together, then in canon another time and a half. A piano introduction with a guitar playing in thirds (à la Van Morrison’s classic songs) gives this the right feel.

BENEDICTION

Liturgical Notes: Leader offers a benediction: “People of God, hear God’s blessing: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:13).

RECESSION

Liturgical Notes: Leader dismisses the congregation: “Go now into this season of light, marching together in the peace and the light of God. You may leave as we sing.” (At the LOFT, we held this service during Epiphany.)

Musical Notes: “Siyahamba” (SNC 293). Use as much percussion as you can—especially hand percussion—but let the celebration be grounded, not flighty. Have a bass or piano give the pitch, and then allow the congregation to sing with verve and spirit, harmonizing as they are able.